A Validated Curriculum to Provide Training to Faculty Regarding Students With Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

The dramatic increase in students with disabilities enrolling at institutions of higher education in recent years (9% of incoming freshmen) has created a need to see that college and university faculty are provided with the knowledge required to enable the success of these students and to comply with federal statutes, such as ADA and Sections 504 and 505 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and with the policies established by their institutions. Exactly what information do faculty need? This study examined the importance and comprehensiveness of the content of a training curriculum for faculty developed at Utah State University as evaluated by a national sample of professionals employed in the disability services offices of colleges and universities throughout the United States. The results indicate that the respondents perceived the curriculum taken as a whole and each of the components as important (mean of 6 on a 7-point scale) and as providing a reasonably comprehensive representation of the essential information (91.8% taken as a whole).

Students with disabilities are becoming more prevalent in colleges. Incoming freshmen reporting disabilities accounted for 9% of the student population, according to the 1998 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey (Henderson, 1999). Horn and Berktold (1999) found that college graduates with disabilities do as well as their nondisabled counterparts in regard to employment in their fields and in the compensation that they earn. However, students with disabilities are less likely to graduate from college (Gardner, 1999; Horn & Berktold, 1999). One factor critical for students' success in college is the behavior of the faculty and the climate they provide for their students with disabilities (Beilke & Yssel, 1999).

The literature suggests that faculty are generally well-intentioned toward students with disabilities and are willing to provide accommodations (Houck, Asselin, Troutman, & Arrington, 1992; Matthews, Anderson, & Skolnick, 1987; Nelson, Dodd, & Smith 1990), but they are not well-informed about what that entails (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995). Thompson, Bethea, and Turner (1997) reported that less than 18% of the faculty they surveyed were familiar with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and only 50% were familiar with the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) or its implications for higher education. Additionally, according to the opinions of disability support services (DSS) directors in colleges and universities, 80% of faculty are concerned about knowing their rights and responsibilities regarding their interactions with students with disabilities (Salzberg et al., 2002).

Content and Time Considerations

Our previous research (Salzberg et al., 2002) suggested that DSS directors were not satisfied with their institution's efforts to train faculty. Further, the study suggested the dimensions of a faculty training program that DSS directors thought would be likely to be effective and functional. Regarding the length of a training program, 40% of respondents indicated that a 1-hour workshop would be practical and 45% indicated a work-

shop between 1–2 hours would be practical. Workshop lengths over 2 hours were thought to be practical by only 3% of the respondents. Therefore, the Accommodating Students With Disabilities (ASD) training program evaluated in this study was designed to fit within a 90-minute period.

There is a lot of information that might be useful and of interest to faculty in regard to students with disabilities in higher education. However, given the time constraints for faculty training described above, the information needs to be prioritized. In the Salzberg et al. (2002) study, DSS directors stated that the content for training needed to be clearly applicable to faculty situations; that training sessions needed to include question and answer opportunities, use of expert speakers, opportunity to meet with or hear from students with disabilities; and need to include DSS professional staff members. These respondents thought that faculty members also would benefit by being given a reference book or manual, learning practical techniques for the classroom, and having information about the laws that apply to students with disabilities in higher education. DSS directors reported that faculty members were very concerned about maintaining academic standards, their rights and responsibilities, and making course modifications. To a slightly lesser degree, DSS directors reported that faculty members were concerned about the rights and responsibilities of students, the process by which students become eligible for accommodations, confidentiality issues, and knowing where faculty can get support to properly accommodate students with disabilities. Other research (Leyser, Vogel, Wyland, & Brulle, 1998) identified areas in which faculty reported they would like to receive training. These included classroom accommodations (42.6%), programs and services on campus (34.3%), testing accommodations (31.7%), and legal issues (20%). Based on our research and existing literature, the ASD Project created a curriculum to help college and university faculty acquire learn about students with disabilities in higher education.

Workshop Presentation Media

Another factor that emerged from the Salzberg et al. (2002) study was the diverse nature of the needs, logistics, and characteristics among institutions of higher education as well as the different views of DSS directors on how they prioritize various content choices and their preferred delivery methods for faculty training. The critical implication for faculty training programs is that programs have to be as flexible as possible so that local DSS directors can tailor the content and delivery for their own institutions of higher education and for specific groups of faculty. This customizability is a hallmark of the ASD curriculum. Workshops can last between 30 minutes and several days. Specific content can be selected for inclusion; other content can be excluded. All content can be modified as per the preferences of the DSS directors. There are scripts and explanations for new DSS directors and loose templates for more experienced. Student panels can be conducted as live interactive sessions, or a video student panel can be used when a live panel is not practical.

When DSS directors were asked how faculty would prefer to have workshops delivered, the majority stated that live presentations would be well received. But many DSS directors also indicated that Web-based information and printed material would be useful, as would individual assistance for faculty members. To this end, the ASD Project designed a customizable, face-to-face workshop to provide essential information with written supplementary units on additional important topics (e.g., universal design, testing accommodations) that could be used for self-study or presented in workshops by DSS staff. As an alternative for faculty who cannot attend a workshop, a Web-based training program was also created. However, only the face-to-face workshop was evaluated in this study.

Method

The methods are presented in two sections. The first section describes the method used to acquire the sample of respondents and to distribute the survey. The second section describes the method used to construct the questionnaire.

Sampling and Survey-Distribution Procedures

The Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) was contacted for their mailing list, which was used as the population for this study. AHEAD members outside the United States were excluded because the ASD training program was designed according to U.S. law.. The survey was sent to 1960 AHEAD members and 21.4%, or 420 were completed and returned. The returns were distributed over 10 federal rehabilitation regions and 13 Carnegie Classification groups (see Tables 3 and 4). Various procedures were used to ensure that the data provided by individual respondents was anonymous.

Survey Design

The purpose of the survey was to obtain opinions from potential users about the comprehensiveness and importance of the content provided in the ASD faculty-training curriculum. The respondents received a description of the training program content and were asked to judge the comprehensiveness and the importance of the content for faculty members at their higher education institutions. Demographic information was collected so that the respondents could be described.

Demographic Information

The demographic information collected included the following: respondents' positions at their current institutions, gender, age, years in their current position, and years working in higher education. Respondents were also asked to name the institution at which they were employed. Once the survey instrument was coded by Carnegie Classification, the name of the institution was separated so that specific responses could not be attributed to a particular institution. The Carnegie Classification groups were created by the Carnegie Foundation (2002) so that institutions of higher education could be described and compared to each other within a relevant framework.

Questionnaire

Respondents were asked to comment on the five sections of the ASD foundation training program, the five supplementary units, and the curriculum as a whole (see Appendix). They were told that the workshop was designed to be delivered in 90 minutes because research had suggested this as the maximum amount of time that faculty would likely attend this type of workshop. Respondents were given information about the design and intention of the training program that might be pertinent to their evaluation. For example, they were told that the curriculum was to be used with faculty in higher education institutions. Next, respondents were provided with a description of each of the five sections of the foundation workshop and asked to respond to two questions: "How comprehensive is the information considering the 90-minute constraint" (on a scale of 1–100), and, "How important is this information for your faculty?" (on a scale of 1–7). For each supplementary unit, a description was included and respondents were asked to rate the importance of the content of this supplementary unit for faculty on a scale of 1–7. Finally, respondents were asked to rate the comprehensiveness of the entire curriculum taken as a whole on a scale of 1–100. Qualitative information was also collected via questions asking respondents to list any essential areas not included and if any areas should be deleted.

Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire went through a rigorous development process. The primary concern was whether descriptions of each of the five sections of the workshop accurately represented its content. To address this concern, the section descriptions were drafted using the actual workshop materials and index as an outline. The resulting draft was reviewed by the ASD staff and revised as per their feedback. Then the outline was examined by the project director and the disability office director for Utah State University. After several revisions, the staff and disability office director were satisfied that the information in the descriptions accurately represented the workshop curriculum. Finally, the survey instrument was formatted by project staff for readability and ease of completion.

Results

The results are presented below in three sections. Data in the first section describe characteristics of the respondents; the second section shows characteristics of the higher education institutions that participated; and the third section presents opinions of the respondents about the ASD curriculum.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Table 1 shows that 72.8% of respondents were either directors of DSS offices or staff members in those offices. In addition, some respondents were faculty members and student service staff members, and 16 % of the respondents were in various other positions. Of the 420 respondents, 330 (78.6%) were female and 80 respondents (19.0%) were male. Ten participants did not report their gender.

Respondents were asked to place their age into one of five categories. Of the respondents, 22 (5.2%) reported being between 18 and 30 years; 73 (17.4%) said they were between 31 and 40; 140 (33.3%) reported their age as between 41 and 50; 152 (36.2%) said they were between 51 and 60; and 25 (6%) reported themselves as over age 61. Eight (1.9%) did not report their age. A majority (69.5%) of respondents were between 41 and 60 years old. Most of the remaining respondents were 31–40 years old (17.4%).

Respondents' number of years of experience in their current positions and those spent working in higher education is presented in Table 2. Years of experience ranged from more than 27 years to 1 year or 2 years. More than 22% of the respondents were in their first two years in their current position, 59.7% were in their current positions from 3–14 years, and 16.5% were in their current positions for 15 years or more.

Table 1

Position and Gender of Respondents' Information

Position	No. of respondents	Percentage of respondents
DSS director	234	55.7
DSS staff	72	17.1
Faculty	16	3.8
Student services	27	6.4
Other	67	16.0
Unreported	4	1.0
Gender	**No. of respondents**	**Percentage of respondents**
Male	80	19.0
Female	330	78.6
Unreported	10	2.4

Table 2

Years of Experience in Position Information

	Years of experience in position		Years in higher education	
Years	No. of respondents	Percentage of respondents	No. of respondents	Percentage of respondents
1–2	94	22.4	29	6.9
3–8	185	44.0	111	26.4
9–14	66	15.7	112	26.7
15–20	42	10.0	79	18.8
21–26	23	5.5	59	14.0
27 or more	4	1.0	21	5.0
Unreported	6	1.4	9	2.1

Table 3

Types of Responding Institutions

Institution Type	No. of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Public	273	65.0
Private, not for profit	118	28.1
Private, for profit	4	1.0
Unreported	25	6.0

Geographic Distribution of Participating Institutions by Federal Rehabilitation Region

Region	States in region	No. of Responses	Percentage of Respondents
I	CT, ME, MA, NH, RI, VT	29	6.9%
II	NJ, NY, PR	36	8.6%
III	DE, DC, MD, PA, VA, WV	50	11.9%
IV	AL, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, SC, TN	59	14.0%
V	IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, WI	95	22.6%
VI	AR, LA, NM, OK, TX	32	7.6%
VII	IA, KS, MO, NE	31	7.4%
VIII	CO, MT, ND, SD, UT, WY	22	5.2%
IX	AZ, CA, HI, NV	41	9.8%
X	AK, ID, OR, WA	16	3.8%
Unknown		9	2.1%
Total		420	

Note. States in region are represented by postal abbreviation

Generally, respondents were in positions in higher education longer than they were in their current positions. Thus, it seems likely that in many cases these respondents started off as staff members in disability service offices or other college/university offices and subsequently changed jobs or moved up to become directors of DSS offices.

Characteristics of the Participating Universities and Colleges

Table 3 presents information about the types of institutions that participated in this study. The majority (65.0%) were publicly funded institutions, while the next largest category, private not-for-profit colleges and universities, constituted 28.1% of the sample. Only four private, for-profit institutions were included in the study. Twenty-five respondents did not answer this question.

Table 4 provides a Carnegie Classification profile of the participating higher education institutions. The largest percentage of participating institutions (26.2%) was extensive or intensive doctoral/research universities. Masters colleges and universities constituted another 22.1% of the sample. Four-year colleges, including Liberal Arts, General, and Bachelor/Associate's colleges made up another 13.5% of the sample and Associate's colleges (two-year colleges) constituted 30% of the sample. A smaller portion of participants came from specialized institutions (2.1%) (e.g., theological seminaries, medical schools, etc.). Twenty-five respondents did not answer this question.

Respondents Opinions About the ASD Curriculum

Table 5 presents the data on respondents' opinions about the ASD curriculum. There are three sections in this table. The first presents respondents' opinions about the ASD Foundation Faculty Training Curriculum, the second presents opinions about the ASD Supplementary Units, and the third presents opinions about the ASD curriculum as a whole.

The ASD Foundation Faculty Training Curriculum. The five sections of the foundation curriculum include: (1) the introduction; (2) the section on the law; (3) the section on the accommodation process; (4) the case story section; and (5) the student panel. For each section of the ASD curriculum, respondents indicated the extent to which they thought that the information presented was comprehensive in relation to what they believe faculty members need to know. Those ratings were expressed as percentages of comprehensiveness on a scale of 1% to 100%. In addition, respondents indicated how important they believe the content is for faculty members. Those ratings were expressed on a Likert scale (Likert, 1932) from 1 to 7, in which 1 was least important and 7 was most important.

This section of Table 5 indicates that these respondents, mostly DSS directors and staff members, believe that each section of the ASD Foundation Faculty Training Curriculum provides information for faculty that is reasonably comprehensive. The range in the mean percentage across sections was 82.7% at the low end to 89.2% at the high end. The introduction, the accommodation process and the case story sections were rated 88% or 89% in regard to comprehensiveness. The sections on the law and the student panel were rated 84% and 82%, respectively.

The perceived importance of the information in each section ranged from a mean of 5.6 at the low end to a mean of 6.4 at the high end across the sections of the foundation curriculum. In sum, all of the sections were viewed as presenting important information for the faculty, and that information was perceived to be reasonably comprehensive.

The ASD Supplementary Units. The second section of Table 5 presents respondents' opinions about the supplementary units of the ASD curriculum. These units include universal design, Web accessibility, testing accommodations, common accommodations, and common faculty-related problems. For each supplementary unit, respondents rated the importance of the information relative to what they believe faculty should know on a scale of 1 to 7. The mean importance rating of the information in these supplementary units ranged from 5.6 at the low end to 6.4 at the high end. Thus, each supplementary unit presented information that was viewed as quite important for faculty members. Information in the Faculty-Related Problems Supplementary Unit was the highest rated (6.4) and information on Web Accessibility had the lowest rating (5.6).

The ASD Curriculum as a Whole. Respondents indicated the extent to which they thought the ASD Faculty Training Curriculum as a whole presented a comprehensive array of information for faculty members concerning students with disabilities in higher education. The mean score was 91.8% on a scale that spanned 1 to 100, indicating that most respondents believe the ASD curriculum includes most of the information they believe faculty members should have.

Table 4

The 2000 Carnegie Classifications of Responding Institutions

Carnegie Classification	No. of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Doctoral/Research Universities—Extensive	78	18.6
Doctoral/Research Universities—Intensive	32	7.6
Master's Colleges and Universities I	84	20.0
Master's Colleges and Universities II	9	2.1
Baccalaureate Colleges—Liberal Arts	24	5.7
Baccalaureate Colleges—General	30	7.1
Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges	3	0.7
Associate's Colleges	126	30.0
Specialized Institutions—Theological seminaries and other	1	0.2
Specialized Institutions—Medical schools and centers	2	0.5
Specialized Institutions—Other separate health profession	3	0.7
Specialized Institutions—Schools of business	1	0.2
Specialized Institutions—Schools of art, music, and design	2	0.5
Unreported	25	6.0

Table 5

Importance and Comprehensiveness Results

Question category	No. of respondents	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Introduction comprehensiveness	395	10	100	89.2	16.43
Introduction importance	409	1	7	5.7	1.25
Law comprehensiveness	400	2	100	84.1	22.14
Law importance	414	2	7	6.3	1.00
Accommodation comprehensiveness	402	10	100	88.3	17.38
Accommodation importance	417	2	7	6.4	1.00
Case story comprehensiveness	396	5	100	88.4	17.42
Case story importance	413	1	7	6.0	1.24
Student panel comprehensiveness	396	5	100	82.7	22.16
Student panel importance	410	1	7	5.6	1.48
Universal design importance	415	1	7	5.7	1.36
Web accessibility importance	417	1	7	5.6	1.37
Testing accommodations Importance	417	1	7	6.3	0.99

Discussion

Similar Findings

An extensive array of materials has been developed at various universities that can be used to provide pertinent information for faculty about students with disabilities (e.g., University of Kentucky, 2000; Ohio State University, 2003; University of Washington, 2003; Utah State University, 2003; etc.). One challenge, given the limited time available for faculty training, was deciding which information to include in a faculty-training program. The content in the ASD curriculum was initially selected based on a study (Salzberg et al., 2002) in which DSS directors and staff members identified the content (e.g., the law, the accommodation process) and activities (e.g., interacting with students who have disabilities and with DSS staff) that they viewed as important in a faculty-training program. In the present study, another large sample of DSS directors and staff members, most of who were quite experienced and who represented a broad array of higher education institutions, examined descriptions of the content of the ASD curriculum and evaluated those for comprehensiveness and for importance for faculty members.

The results of the survey indicate that respondents are generally pleased with the content of the ASD curriculum. The overall content of the ASD curriculum was perceived to be 91.8% comprehensive and, when the content was also examined by section, each section was reported to be highly comprehensive (82.7%–89.2%) and highly important (5.6–6.4 on a 7-point scale). The outcome of this study affirms previous research (Salzberg et al., 2002) in which DSS directors reported what they believed to be important content in a faculty-training workshop. While the ASD workshop may not contain all the information a group of faculty members might need or want, it is designed so that DSS staff can easily provide additional information to faculty as they deem appropriate and as time permits. Moreover, the ASD workshop is flexibly designed so that DSS staff can customize training sessions as they see fit to address the specific needs of changing audiences.

Respondents in this study reported that the accommodation process and the law sections contained the most important content (6.4 and 6.3 respectively). The case story section, which provided a working example of the accommodation process, was the next most highly rated in importance (6.0). This is consistent with previous research, which determined that faculty were not well informed about the accommodation process (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995) and not familiar with the law concerning students with disabilities (Thompson, Bethea, & Turner, 1997). Of the supplementary units, faculty-related problems (6.4), testing accommodations (6.3), and common accommodations (6.1) were rated the most important. From this data it seems that, according to DSS directors, issues pertaining to the law and to the accommodation process are the two most important types of information that need to be conveyed to faculty, although the other topics were also deemed to be quite important.

The sections that were rated as least but still important were the introduction (5.7) and the student panel (5.6). The introduction provided statistical information about students with disabilities in higher education, while the student panel provided a live or recorded panel of students with disabilities discussing the issues they face in the classroom. These data suggest that while these sections are still viewed as highly important, they are not seen to be as critical to the audience as the procedural and legal information contained in the law and accommodation process sections. This trend is also seen in the supplementary units where topics like universal design (5.7) and Web accessibility (5.6) were seen as highly important but not quite as important as faculty-related problems (6.4) and testing accommodations (6.3).

Limitations

While the respondents in this study were mostly experienced DSS directors and staff members who should be in a good position to make judgments regarding content for faculty training, there was an important limitation. The data in this study was based on opinions. Even opinions of knowledgeable people may be amiss on some occasions.

Many DSS directors responded to the survey; however, so did other AHEAD members, who might not be directly involved in delivering faculty training. We had no way to separate these respondents for independent analysis or to know if the results would be different across the two groups. In a similar vein, we do not know how the results of a survey of faculty members or a survey of students with disabilities rather than AHEAD members might differ from these.

Suggestions for Future Research

One line of potentially useful future research would be to replicate this study with faculty respondents. It would be of particular interest to do this with a group of faculty members who have had experience working with students with disabilities. It would also be interesting to

replicate this study with novice faculty to see how their perceptions differ from those of experienced faculty. Similarly, a replication of this study with respondents who are students with disabilities would be of great interest.

A more direct question, but harder to scientifically investigate, is whether the behavior and attitudes of faculty members toward students with disabilities actually changes in a positive way after receiving training. Would these faculty members now be more comfortable with and more welcoming to students with disabilities? Would they use more universal design principles in their courses? Would they be more knowledgeable of disability issues and laws when they interact with students with disabilities and with DSS staff members? Would they be more constructive in their interactions with students with disabilities? A final, even more difficult, but perhaps most important, question for future research is whether training for faculty members in a higher education institution improves the success (i.e., retention and graduation rate) of students with disabilities. These challenging but important questions await further research.

A Final Note

The development of training programs is challenging, especially in areas that have had little previous work. Professionals in curriculum development (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2002) recommend that training programs should be developed using a systematic research and development process and should be empirically validated to the extent that it is practical to do so. The ASD curriculum emerged via a systematic, empirical, development process and is one of the few training programs that present content subjected to a partial validation process. While many challenging research questions about the impact of faculty training on the success of students with disabilities remain, as well as the specific impact of this curriculum, it does appear that at least the content of the ASD program is valid in the eyes of DSS directors and staff members.

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Appendix

Outline of the ASD workshop questionnaire

Demographic Information

The Foundation Workshop

I Introduction

[allocated presentation time: 5 min.]
This section provides background information to faculty on students with disabilities. It introduces participants to the different types of disabilities and summarizes what students with disabilities have to say about working with faculty.

Section Outline:

- Number of incoming freshmen in college with disabilities
- Types and frequency of various disabilities
- Outcome data on college graduates with disabilities
    - Equally likely to be employed, earn comparable salaries, equally likely to attend graduate school
- What students with disabilities think about faculty (generally positive)
- Implications for faculty
    - Students with disabilities will be in classes and labs, will develop the same array of careers as others, and need to meet the same standards as others

II The Law

[allocated presentation time: 5 min.] This section educates participants about the implications of the ADA and Section 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Section Outline:

- Laws that apply to higher education
- Four implications of the laws:
    - Right to be in higher education if otherwise qualified
    - Right to access academic and nonacademic programs
    - Eligibility for reasonable accommodations
    - Right to confidentiality
- Accommodation defined:
    - Adjustments to mitigate the impact of a disability
    - Accommodations are designed on an individual basis
- Disability Support Services:
    - Colleges/universities have DSS offices which support students, faculty, and the institution of higher education
    - Disability services and accommodations should be coordinated by the DSS

III The Accommodation Process

[allocated presentation time: 10 min.]
This section teaches participants a 5-step process that students go through to receive disability-related services and accommodations and for those accommodations to be designed, implemented, and adjusted.

Section Outline:

- Step 1: Getting to the DSS
  - Variety of ways
  - Syllabus statements
  - Talking about disability-related accommodations in class
- Step 2: Meeting Eligibility Requirements
  - DSS counselor evaluates professionally credible documentation
- Step 3: Deciding on Specific Accommodations
  - Based on disability-related limitations resulting in individual recommendations for each course
- Step 4: Implementing Accommodations
  - Faculty/student/DSS roles
  - All disability-related accommodations must be coordinated through the DSS
- Step 5: Revising the Accommodation Plan
  - Often revisions are not needed
  - While revisions are being worked out, continue to provide the recommended accommodations
  - Communicate to the DSS office any changes you and the student make

IV The Case Story

[allocated presentation time: 25-30 min.]
This section uses real case stories to illustrate many of the specific problems and issues that arise in the steps of the accommodation process as described in Section 3. Discussion fosters interaction and addresses common faculty concerns. Several case stories are available to choose from, each presenting a student with a different disability. These cases are the heart of the workshop.

V The Student Panel

[allocated presentation time: 20-25 min.]
The student panel gives participants the chance to interact with at least three students with disabilities who are using accommodations. This is set up as a Q&A session with the DSS director or workshop facilitator as a mediator. It personalizes the information presented in the previous sections of the workshop and gives faculty an opportunity to meet and hear directly from students with disabilities.

Section Outline:

- Choosing the live panel or alternate video panel (if live panel is not feasible)
- Preparing your panelists